

TEXAS Blues



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BLUEBIRDS AND WHITETAILS

How Managing White-tailed Deer Habitat Can Benefit Bluebirds

By **Dr. James Kroll**

Professor Emeritus of Forest Wildlife Management

I have spent most of the almost five decades of my career working with white-tailed deer throughout eastern North American and parts of Central America. It may come as a surprise to game managers, I began my career as a non-game biologist, studying everything from amphibians and reptiles to birds. So, I have carried my love for all species, game or non-game, along with my whitetail work. Deer are what we refer to as a Keystone Species, meaning that they have the greatest impact on the habitats in which they live. The Bison also was a keystone species, principally responsible for maintaining Great Plains plant communities in the early successional stages enjoyed by a host of species, some of which now are either extinct or struggling for survival.

There is a tremendous interest in the U.S. among landowners to intensively manage whitetails. Each year millions are spent on habitat management, food plots and supplemental feeding of America's most popular game animal. Our research has focused on food plots for some 40 years, and I quickly learned that the plant varieties planted for deer, also benefit more than 200 species of vertebrates! We have cataloged everything from beavers to snakes using our research plots. My love of bluebirds brought me to study and observe how a food plot planted for deer could greatly enhance bluebird populations. In eastern Texas, where our research facility is located, bluebirds have been de-

clining for many years! Yet, I noticed that they are holding their own in and around the habitats we manage for deer. It is safe to say, bluebirds are not deep forest birds; and, these forests do not really benefit whitetails. A deer's world is what we call the "deer zone," the band of vegetation from ground level to about 4.5 feet. Being herbivores, they require about a ton of green material each year to thrive. The only way to keep vegetation in the deer zone is to manage the forest in a way that permits sunlight to reach the ground, and create openings and fields to grow the forbaceous vegetation deer prefer.



We regularly plant at least 2% of each property to food plots, and an additional 30% to managed openings of native vegetation. We also conduct regular prescribed fires to keep rapid forest succession from happening. Another important factor in managing the deer landscape includes one of the most misused natural resources in the Continent—the right-of-way! Normally, the owners of the

rights-of-way spend millions each year, trying to keep woody vegetation under control. It occurred to us in the 1980s that there could be a unique partnership between private landowners and utility/petroleum companies to create sound vegetation management strategies that promote plant diversity, as well as, the early successional stages beneficial both to bluebirds and deer. We even talked some power companies in the Southeast to cost-share with landowners on planting food (continued on page 2)

How Managing White-tailed Deer Habitat Can Benefit Bluebirds

plots on rights-of-way. You do not have to be an avid deer hunter to plant food plots! In the eastern portion of Texas, our research has shown that specific plantings are beneficial to insect production and foraging habitat for birds. So, I wish to provide you with a short primer on created food plots for birds.

There are two types of food plots—cool season and warm season. Cool season plots are planted in early fall, usually late September-early October. Although there are a host of plant varieties being sold for deer food plots, the single most reliable variety is oats! We have worked with LSU for almost 30 years, selectively breeding oats for deer forage. The same characteristics we have selected also benefit non-game species. Oats are the most nutritious and palatable variety, but they had one big weakness. They freeze out at 28° F! So, we selected and developed an oat that could withstand the most challenging low temperatures you can find in Texas! The Louisiana 99017 variety, sold under the brand name “Buck”) is the only oat ever produced specifically for wildlife. It also is one that attracts almost 200 species of insects.

Now, you probably are asking, “Why would plant a food plot that grows well in winter for bluebirds?” The answer is simple. Oats emerge in October, grow throughout the winter, then begin to mature in spring. They are in production for 7 months, and are at their peak just when bluebirds are nesting. And, we also plant clover varieties with the oats, that continue growing well into the summer. It is possible to create a food plot in fall that lands well into the hot summer months.

Warm season food plots, as the name implies, are planted in the spring and grow throughout the summer. Our most productive warm season plots focus on two varieties—cowpeas and chicory. We plant cowpeas as soon as the soil temperature reaches 60° F, and they germinate and emerge in just a few days! We also interplant field corn among the peas to add vertical structure to the plots. In areas where deer are too abundant, we have developed two types of fences to protect the young plants until we are ready for the deer to eat them. The first is a three-wire configuration that takes advantage of what we learned early on about deer vision. Whitetails are near-sighted (20/150) and

have poor depth perception. An electric fence that has two wires on the plot side, one at 12 in. and another at 24 in., plus a single outrigger wire 36 in. out from the two wires at 18 in., will keep most deer out of a plot. All three wires are energized by a solar-recharged energizer, eliminating the need for an electrical outlet.



When we first developed these fences in the late 1980s, birders were quite critical of using them, because birds would land on the wires and be “electrocuted!” So, we set up a field meeting with the local Audubon Society members to observe the

fences in operation. As we got out of the van, a Scissor-tailed flycatcher landed on one of the wires, looked around, preened, and flew off. The issue was forgotten! In order for an animal to feel the effect we wanted for deer, they would have to be grounded; the same reason birds sit on power lines without injury.

About seven years ago, we began working with the Triden Corporation, testing a new polypropylene netwire fencing material for protecting food plots and sensitive areas from deer. These fences also are quite effective and economical, costing about \$1.25 per foot to install. The netwire also keeps out some non-game animals, but small rodents and rabbits have no problem getting under the fence; and of course, birds can easily use the plots.

Chicory is a little different as it is both a cool season and warm season crop. It also is a perennial lasting up to five years. Planted in the early fall, chicory becomes well established over winter and is very drought hardy, making it a wonderful summer crop

in Texas. Chicory is in the dandelion family and was brought to the U.S. around 1790 from France as a cattle fodder. During the Civil War, Louisiana residents roasted the parsnip-like roots to make a coffee substitute. Although officially a medicinal plant, chicory has no caffeine!

We place bluebird boxes along the edges of our food plots. We also plant several shrub species along edges that produce fruits and berries, which our bluebirds enjoy. Believe it or not, catalpa trees attack the famous catalpa worm, which bluebirds pick from the large leaves and stems.



Lastly, we maintain openings of one quarter to two acres in size, periodically disking them to encourage annual “weeds,” both for our deer and for birds. Fertilizer applied twice a year will enhance production, but a prescribed burn in late winter will also work fine.

It may be a new concept to intensively manage for song birds, but homeowners actually have been doing it for years, when they place feeders around their property to attract birds. The foods provided in feeders are no different from the pelleted rations managers supply to deer! But, there are issues with feeding both birds and deer. Although we never discourage either, we prefer to use native forage management and food plots to support both our winged and four-footed friends! Hopefully, I have given you a new way of looking at bluebird management.



Dr. James Kroll

James received the BS in 1969 from Baylor University, the MS in 1970 from Baylor University and the PhD in 1973 from Texas A&M University, where he was the Distinguished Graduate of 1973. Dr. Kroll is one of the leading wildlife biologists in the nation. Due to his extensive research on White Tailed Deer, Dr Kroll has earned the nickname Dr. Deer.

Although known around the world as the authority on White-tailed Deer, Kroll took time out from deer research to found and launch the nation’s first regional geospatial service center, The Columbia Regional Geospatial Service Center, which later figured significantly in the recovery of the Shuttle Columbia and its crew, following the terrible disaster on 1 February, 2003. The

Center was cited by NASA and the federal and Texas agencies as being critical to these efforts.

Over the years, Dr. Kroll has received numerous awards and honors, authored many journal publications and articles, created videos, and has appeared in two leading national TV shows: North American Whitetail Television, Sportsman Channel, which received the Golden Moose Award. Kroll also starred in the hit television program, Dr. Deer, airing on the Sportsman Channel and Fox Sports.

He manages a popular website - Dr. Deer.com which serves as an on-line education and deer management assistance resource.

Dr. Kroll joined TBS at the Blueberry Festival in Nacogdoches last June. For more information on Dr. Kroll and his many accomplishments visit.drdeer.com



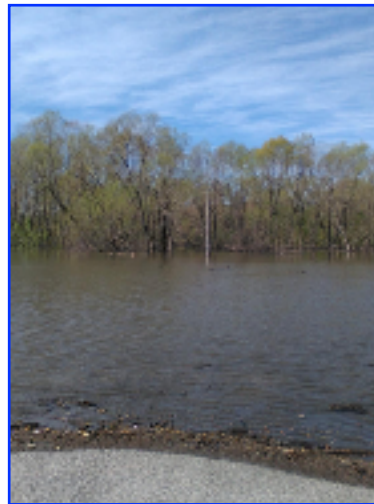
Remember Your Bluebird Friends While You Are Shopping From Home

Select **Texas Bluebird Society** as your designated charity, and TBS receives a small portion of your total purchases. It is easy! Use smile.amazon.com when ordering.

Bluebirds Still Love The Benbrook Lake Trail

By Donna Honkomp

This is our fourth year of monitoring Bluebird boxes at Lake Benbrook, Benbrook, TX and submitting data into "Nest Watch". Looking over the last four years of data, we have noticed a steady decline in the number of bluebird hatchlings that have fledged in the area that we monitor. The first fledge this year was on April 12, 2020 whereas last year was February 15, 2019. Potential reasons may include changes in climate, the cooler temperatures in February and March this year, and area flooding over the past two years. These conditions may have influenced both the number and success of nesting attempts as well as predation.



Since Lake Benbrook is a flood control lake for the Trinity River in Fort Worth and due to the rains earlier this year, we had a box that flooded when the lake went above flood stage. Unfortunately, we lost the hatchlings in this box. The waters have just recently receded, and we were able to re-locate this box to higher ground



Due to the predation so far this year, we (a.k.a. my husband) have installed several types of hole extenders to our boxes to see what works best. The Noel Guard (pic on left) and a PVC extender (pic on right).



We have also added a Kingston Baffle (above left) and a PVC pipe (above right) to a few free-standing poles. It will be interesting to see which predator guard is best suited for our environment.

As we work around all of these environmental issues, we have also had boxes stolen from the area. It is just something that happens, though never deters us from continuing to add a few more boxes as needed so that we can continue to provide an appropriate habitat for our cavity nesters.



We do our best to pick up the trash in the area. Here is just an example of how some birds will use what is available.

(I guess this female bluebird did not read the nest building manual that clearly states the inner layer should be made of fine grasses! It appears she does love a good bargain from Walmart.)

Ok.....this picture was from several years ago, though it is my all-time favorite and I just had to include.

A fledgling with an attitude!



We just love monitoring our bluebirds and with a few downsides, there are always so many more upsides. So far this year we have had Chickadee's, Titmouse, Wren's and Eastern Bluebirds in our nest boxes.

The following photos were taken by Beth Almaraz.



Another success story!

5 eggs laid
5 hatched
5 fledged



Terry Schmidt, Park Ranger with the US Army Corp of Engineers, installed the initial bluebird boxes in 2016 and members from the Cross Timbers Master Naturalist Chapter have been monitoring the boxes and submitting data since that time.



We enjoy monitoring the boxes and will gradually replace our older boxes with the TBS Texas certified nestboxes.



Even the Carolina Chickadees enjoy our nestboxes.

We also appreciate the opportunity to educate those individuals that stop and ask us what we are doing? We could talk forever about bluebirds, and we always provide information on the Texas Bluebird Society and encourage them to install a bluebird box in their own backyard to begin monitoring.

Donna Honkomp was awarded the TBS Bluebirder Of The Year for her trail monitoring, NestWatch reporting, and her enthusiastic efforts and activities for public education.



Members Attend NABS Conference In Kearney, Nebraska

By Lyn Olds

The phrase **'birds of a feather flock together'** is at least over 470 years old. It was in use as far back as the mid-16th century. At some point, a bird's flocking behavior started to be applied metaphorically to people who acted in a similar way, and now today, we have this saying.

From Wednesday, March 11th to Sunday, March 15th, bird lovers flocked to Kearney, Nebraska for the North American Bluebird Society Conference hosted by Bluebirds Across Nebraska. There were 168 registered, representing 21 U.S. states, as well nine attendees from Canada, with many scheduled events to choose from. Workshops, educational speakers, crane viewing blinds, birding bus field trips, prairie culture field trips, auctions & raffles made busy, fun-filled days for all guests. Several inches of beautiful snow fell one day & added to the landscape but didn't hinder birders or the birds.

National Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary offered Sandhill Crane viewing to witness one of the great birding wonders of the world: 500,000 cranes visiting the central Platte River to fuel up on grain from nearby cornfields in preparation for their long journey to their Arctic and sub-Arctic nesting grounds. About 20 million other migratory birds make stops along the Platte River– from white-fronted geese to piping plovers, mallards and bald eagles- giving bird enthusiasts opportunities to see much. It was amazing! Some of us had never seen bald eagles in the wild, so this was unforgettable. We saw cranes everywhere- on the ground and in the air- all day long! Jaw-dropping!



Lyn Olds' shopping bag made a perfect centerpiece. (Top L to R) **Mark and Lyn Olds, Kevin Corwin, Pam and Jimmy McKissick.** (Bottom L to R) **Ron and Pauline Tom, Roberta Marshall, Harry and Carol Miller**

Each attendee had their story to share. It didn't matter what state or country we were from- the love of birds made us all family. At Friday night's banquet, we had to move extra chairs so our "Texas Table" of nine could sit together. We represented Fort Worth, Dallas, Rowlett, River Oaks & Mountain City. Kevin Corwin, NABS Regional Director (affectionately dubbed "honorary Texan") joined Texans for group photo.

The COVID-19 journey started weeks before the start of the conference and later escalated, but no attendees had it or spread it as we all flocked together to love all our birds in Kearney.

You find such interesting stories, videos and photos on
[TBS Facebook page](#)

Clifford Shackelford shared this photo/story from his friend **Howard Williamson** in Nacogdoches. "This month, he has 2 different duck boxes each with a different clutch of bluebird eggs."
Taken April 25.



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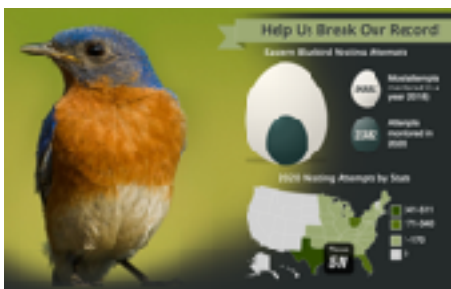
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While staying at home...

Nestwatch.org

Every nest counts!

[* message from NestWatch](#)



Volunteers Are Appreciated!

Usually spring time is full of festivals which means volunteers are busy, busy, busy! But as we all know, we cannot classify anything as “usual” these days.

However, some of our members are staying busy at a distance. **Tony Whiteley** of Dripping Springs ferried 140 nestboxes from Central TX to (nest box distributor) **Sharon Miggans’** storage in Aubrey, north of Denton.

Dee Myer made the trip from Montgomery to north of Nacogdoches to pickup 140 nestboxes from builder **Shannon Ramsey** and deliver them to our Conroe storage location.

Vanessa Voisinet is our Facebook administrator. Great bluebird photos! Check out **Bobbie Le Compte Leonard’s** video of bluebird babies fledging!

The following volunteers were able to participate in the final events held in February and early March.

Barbara Boucher
Linda Crum

Janis Boulware
Patti Marshall

Caryn Brewer
Paul Nelson

Thanks For Your Financial \$upport!

David Canahl
Anne Cassidy
Terry R Corbell
Jeff Detweiler
June Estes
Gary & Brenda Fest
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Lorraine Schneider
Nancy Sheppard
Kay Smelley
Ed & Kay Sones
Janet Stockard
David & Edwina Thomas
Phyllis & Ben Thomas
Peter Walsh
Julie & Maggie Weber

Welcome New Members!

**New members who give us permission to print their name.*

- Michael D Arriens
- Shonda Atkins
- Brandy Biswas
- Patti Brown
- Beverly Brown
- Jeff Bufkin
- Brenda Cloy
- Bruce Coleman
- Marina M. Crkvenjakov
- Bradley Culter
- Laura Daly
- Joan Delashaw
- Jeff Detweiler
- Colleen Eckert
- Avery Freeman
- Jerri Grimland
- Sandra Haldeman
- Lisa Hutchison
- Vicki Johnson
- Pud Kearns
- Richard Kenjura
- Iva Knight
- Kim LaFlamme
- Jennifer Lancaster
- Dena Lovett
- Lisa Mabry
- Sheryl Marquez
- Lorrie Mathers
- Sue Mecklenburg
- KM, Magnolia
- Catie Mong
- Ellen Morris
- B J Moser
- Kay Nabers
- Cathleen Nickel
- Jennifer Orms
- Daphne Rawlinson
- Pat Reeves
- Ken Rittman
- William Roberts
- Linda Robison
- Lorraine Schneider
- Jesse/Denise Seals
- Doris Skrove
- Kay Smelley
- Phyllis Stegen
- Lesa Tanisia
- Michelle Tolbert
- Frank/Patricia Trentham
- Doty Twyla
- Lora B Vestal
- Stephanie Vickers
- John Weihrich
- Liz Wilson
- Jesslin Wood

+ **40 new members joined**
who wanted name withheld

Visit [TBS Facebook page](#) - Great photos, videos, and stories!



Coralbean *Erythrina herbacea*.
This plant is blooming right now.
Photo by Almost Eden Nursery

Why use Native Plants?

By **Linda Crum**

Master Naturalist/Master Gardener

When we refer to native plants, we are really talking about indigenous plants – plants that have evolved over thousands of years in the same habitat in which they are currently found. Indigenous applies to regional or ecological boundaries. No gardener would intentionally harm the environment. No garden is an island. Your plant selection may have far-reaching consequences. It is particularly important to choose indigenous plants when gardening for wildlife. These plants provide the best – often the only – available food and habitat for wildlife. Indigenous plants conserve resources and reduce maintenance; maintain a healthy web of life; maintain natural processes in forests, wetlands, fields and meadows; preserve regional aesthetic identity and sense of place. Texas Bluebird Society provides a native plant list on <https://www.texasbluebirdsociety.org/index.php> in the Resources section of the website.

When considering that next plant that you will add to your garden, **GO NATIVE!**

The Texas Bluebird Society newsletter, *TX Blues*, is published four times a year: March ■ May ■ July ■ October
Debbie Bradshaw Park, Editor
Send stories/photos to editor@txblues.org

Moved?

Send email/address changes to records@txblues.org



Federal law protects all native nesting birds!

- Do not disturb birds or collect nests/eggs.
- Monitor and report activity to NestWatch.



Spring TX
An indigo bunting checking out the eastern bluebird nestbox and 5 babies. Papa doesn't seem to mind his presence. They flew in together.

Silver Wolf Images shared this photo on Facebook. 4/29/2020